

Working for the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) for the past 9.5 years has been an experience marked by both profound highs and significant lows. There have been countless moments when I have had meaningful interactions with Veterans—moments that were rewarding not only for the Veteran, but also for me as a responder. Those experiences are a powerful reminder of why this work matters and why so many of us remain committed to the mission.

However, there is another side of this work that deserves equal attention. At any given moment, a responder can transition from a meaningful and supportive interaction to a call involving racial slurs, profanity, threats of sexual violence, threats of harm or death, or statements wishing harm upon the responder and their family. While responders understand that Veterans may contact the VCL during some of the most difficult and emotionally challenging moments of their lives, repeated exposure to this level of verbal and emotional abuse can have a profound impact on the people responsible for providing support.

The message that “it’s all about the Veterans” is one I understand and deeply respect. The Veteran must remain at the center of our mission. However, that principle should not be interpreted to mean that responders are expected to indefinitely absorb abuse without adequate protections, support, or intervention. Supporting Veterans and protecting responders should not be viewed as competing priorities. They are interconnected.

Responders are expected to follow policies, procedures, and standards of conduct in every interaction. There are consequences when responders fail to meet those expectations. It is reasonable, therefore, to consider what corresponding protections should exist for responders when callers engage in repeated or extreme abusive behavior.

Other federal agencies and facilities have established standards of behavior for individuals who access their services. I believe there is value in exploring what a similar framework could look like for the VCL—one that clearly communicates that while Veterans will continue to be treated with compassion, dignity, and respect, abuse directed toward responders will not simply be accepted without boundaries or consideration for its impact. This is not about asking responders to become less compassionate, less patient, or less understanding. It is about recognizing that responders are human beings, too.

There is a common perception that the longer someone performs this work, the easier it becomes to manage difficult or abusive interactions. My experience has been the opposite. After 9.5 years, the cumulative impact has become increasingly difficult to carry. The abuse does not necessarily become easier to process simply because we have experienced it before. In some cases, each interaction can add another layer to an already significant emotional burden.

For me personally, I have reached a point where the impact has become almost unbearable. I have noticed the work slowly affecting the passion I once felt so strongly for what we do. During a recent call, I was berated while repeatedly being referred to as a bitch, nigger, and threatened to be raped. Unfortunately, I was instructed to remain on the line with the caller and endure the abuse because the caller threatened suicide. As a result, I experienced significant anxiety each time a new call came in for several months afterward.

Initially, I was frustrated and disappointed with myself for allowing that particular interaction to affect me so deeply. I questioned why, after nearly a decade of doing this work, I was still impacted by a difficult call. Eventually, however, I realized that my response did not represent weakness or a lack of commitment to the mission. It reminded me of something equally important: I am human. Responders are often expected to provide callers with the very things they may desperately need in their most vulnerable moments—respect, safety, emotional support, compassion, care, and reassurance. I believe responders deserve those same things in the workplace.

If we expect responders to continue showing up, call after call, regardless of how difficult the previous interaction may have been, then we must also ask ourselves what systems are in place to help protect and restore those responders. Mission support must include more than ensuring that responders are available to answer the next call. It should also include meaningful measures to protect their mental and emotional well-being, establish reasonable boundaries around abusive behavior, and provide appropriate support following particularly traumatic interactions.

I remain committed to the VCL mission and to serving Veterans. That commitment is precisely why I believe this conversation is necessary. Protecting responders is not a departure from the mission—it is an investment in the people who carry it out every day. If we want responders to

continue providing compassionate, effective, and consistent care, we must create an environment in which they are also afforded compassion, protection, support, and care.

The mission matters. The Veterans matter. And the people carrying out that mission matter, too.